

HE DID NOT SEE TREVOR DONALDSON for some weeks. Then they met in London at his club, for a business talk and a spot of lunch. Circumstances which they could not control had rendered them less friendly. Owing to regrouping in the financial world, their interests were now opposed, and if one of them stood to make money out of aluminium the other stood to lose. So the talk had been cautious. Donaldson, the weaker man, felt tired and worried after it. He had not, to his knowledge, made a mistake, but he might have slipped unwittingly, and be poorer, and have to give up his county state. He looked at his host with hostility and wished he could harm him. Sir Richard was aware of this, but felt no hostility in return. For one thing, he was going to win, for another, hating never interested him. This was probably the last occasion on which they would foregather socially; but he exercised his usual charm. He wanted, too, to find out during lunch how far Donaldson was aware of his own danger. Clifford Clarke (who was allied with him) had failed to do this.

After adjourning to the cloakroom and washing their hands at adjacent basins, they sat opposite each other at a little table. Down the long room sat other pairs of elderly men, eating, drinking, talking quietly, instructing the waiters. Inquiries were exchanged about Mrs Donaldson and the young Miss Conways, and there were some humorous references to golf. Then Donaldson said, with a change in his voice: "Golf's all you say, and the great advantage of it in these days is that you get it practically anywhere. I sued to think our course was good, for a little country course, but it is far below the average. This is somewhat of a disappointment to us both, since we settled down there specially for the golf. The fact is, the country is not at all what it seems when you first go there."

"So I've always heard."

"My wife likes it, of course, she has her Sealyhams, she has her flowers, she has her local charities—though in these days one's not supposed to speak of 'charity'. I don't know why. I should have thought it was a good word, charity. She runs the Women's Institute, so far as it consents to be run, but Conway, Conway, you'd never believe how offhand the village women are in these days. They don't elect Mrs Donaldson president yearly as a matter of course. She takes turn and turn with cottagers."

"Oh, that's the spirit of the age, of course. One's always running into it in some form or other. For instance, I don't get nearly the deference I did from my clerks."

"But better work from them, no doubt," said Donaldson gloomily.

“No. But probably they’re better men.”

“Well, perhaps the ladies at the Women’s Institute are becoming better women. But my wife doubts it. Of course, our village is particularly unfortunate, owing to that deplorable hotel. It has had such a bad influence. We had an extraordinary case before us on the Bench recently, connected with it.”

“That hotel did look too flash—it would attract the wrong crowd.”

“I’ve also had bother bother bother with the Rural District Council over the removal of tins, and another bother—a really maddening one—over a right of way through the church meadows. That almost made me lose my patience. And I really sometimes wonder whether I’ve been sensible in digging myself in in the country, and trying to make myself useful in local affairs. There is no gratitude. There is no warmth of welcome.”

“I quite believe it, Donaldson, and I know I’d never have a country place myself, even if the scenery is as pleasant as yours is, and even if I could afford it. I make do with a service flat in town, and I retain a small furnished cottage for my girls’ holidays, and when they leave school I shall partly take them and partly send them abroad. I don’t believe in undiluted England, nice as are sometimes the English. Shall we go up and have coffee?”

He ran up the staircase briskly, for he had found out what he wanted to know: Donaldson was feeling poor. He stuck him in a low leathern armchair, and had a look at him as closed his eyes. That was it: he felt he couldn’t afford his “little place”, and was running it down, so that no one should be surprised when he gave it up. Meanwhile, there was one point in the conversation it amused him to take up now that business was finished with: the reference to that “extraordinary case” connected with the local hotel.

Donaldson opened his eyes when asked, and they had gone prawn-like. “Oh, that was a case, it was a really really,” he said. “I knew such things existed, of course, but I assumed in my innocence they were confined to Piccadilly. However, it has all been traced back to the hotel, the proprietress

has had a thorough fright, and I don't think there will be any trouble in the future. Indecency between males."

"Oh, good Lord!" said Sir Richard coolly. "Black or white?"

"White, please, it's an awful nuisance, but I can't take black coffee now, although I greatly prefer it. You see, some of the hotel guests—there was a bar, and some of the villagers used to go in there after cricket because they thought it smarter than that charming old thatched pub by the church—you remember that old thatched pub. Villagers are terrific snobs, that's one of the disappointing discoveries one makes. The bar got a bad reputation of a certain type, especially at weekends, someone complained to the police, a watch was set, and the result was this quite extraordinary case. . . . Really, really, I wouldn't have believed it. A little milk, please, Conway, if I may, just a little; I'm not allowed to take my coffee black."

"So sorry. Have a liqueur."

"No, no thanks, I'm not allowed that even, especially after lunch."

"Come on, do—I will if you will. Waiter, can we have two double cognacs?"

"He hasn't heard you. Don't bother."

"Conway had not wanted the waiter to hear him, he had wanted an excuse to be out of the room and have a minute alone. He was suddenly worried in case that milkman had got into a scrape. He had scarcely thought about him since—he had a very full life, and it included an intrigue with a cultivated woman, which was gradually ripening—but nobody could have been more decent and honest, or more physically attractive in a particular way. It had been a charming little adventure, and a remarkably lively one. And their parting had been perfect. Wretched if the lad had come to grief! Enough to make one cry. He offered up a sort of prayer, ordered the cognacs, and rejoined Donaldson with his usual briskness. He put on the Renaissance armour that suited him so well, and "How did the hotel case end?" he asked.

“We committed him for trial.”

“Oh! As bad as that?”

Well, we thought so. Actually a gang of about half a dozen were involved, but we only caught one of them. His mother, if you please, is president of the Women’s Institute, and hasn’t had the decency to resign! I tell you, Conway, these people aren’t the same flesh and blood as oneself. One pretends they are, but they aren’t. And what with this disillusionment, and what with the right of way, I’ve a good mind to clear out next year, and leave the so-called country to stew in its own juice. It’s utterly corrupt. This man made an awfully bad impression on the Bench and we didn’t feel that six months, which is the maximum we are allowed to impose, was adequate to the offence. And it was all so revoltingly commercial—his only motive was money.”

Conway felt relieved; it couldn’t be his own friend, for anyone less grasping. . .

“And another unpleasant feature—at least for me—is that he had the habit of taking his clients into my grounds.”

“How most vexatious for you!”

“It suited his convenience, and of what else should he think? I have a little wood—you didn’t see it—which stretches up to the hotel, so he could easily bring people in. A path my wife was particularly fond of—a mass of bluebells in springtime—it was there they were caught. You may well imagine this has helped to put me off the place.”

“Who caught them?” he asked, holding his glass up to the light; their cognacs had arrived.

“Our local bobby. For we do possess that extraordinary rarity, a policeman who keeps his eyes open. He sometimes commits errors of judgment—he did on this occasion—but he’s certainly observant, and as he was coming down one of the other paths, a public one, he saw a bright yellow shirt through the bracken—upsa! Take care!”

“Upsa!” were some drops of brandy, which Conway had split. Alas, alas, there could be no doubt about it. He felt deeply distressed, and rather guilty. The young man must have decided after their successful encounter to use the wood as a rendezvous. It was a cruel stupid world, and he was countenancing it more than he should. Wretched, wretched, to think of that good-tempered, harmless chap being bruised and ruined. . . the whole thing so unnecessary—betrayed by the shirt he was so proud of. . . . Conway was not often moved, but this time he felt much regret and compassion.

“Well, he recognized that shirt at once. He had particular reasons for keeping a watch on its wearer. And he got him, he got him. But he lost the other man. He didn’t charge them straight away, as he ought to have done. I think he was genuinely startled and could scarcely believe his eyes. For one thing, it was so early in the morning—barely seven o’clock.”

“A strange hour!” said Conway, and put his glass down, and folded his hands on his knee.

“He caught sight of them as they were getting up after committing the indecency, also he saw money pass, but instead of rushing in there and then he made an elaborate and totally unnecessary plan for interrupting the youth on the further side of my house, and of course he could have got him any time, any time. A stupid error of judgment. A great pity. He never arrested him until 7.45.”

“Was there then sufficient evidence for an arrest?”

“There was an abundant evidence of a medical character, if you follow me—what a case, oh, what a case!—also there was the money on him, which clinched his guilt.”

“Mayn’t the money have been in connection with his round?”

“No. It was a note, and he only had small change in connection with his round. We established that from his employer. But how ever did you guess he was on a round?”

“You told me,” said Conway, who never became flustered when he made a slip. “You mentioned that he had a milk round and that the mother was connected with some local organization which Mrs Donaldson takes an interest in.”

“Yes, yes, the Women’s Institute. Well, having fixed all that up, our policeman then went on to the hotel, but it was far too late by that time, some of the guests were breakfasting, others had left, he couldn’t go round cross-questioning everyone, and no one corresponded to the description of the person whom he saw being hauled up out of the fern.”

“What was the description?”

“An old man in pyjamas and a mackintosh—our Chairman was awfully anxious to get hold of him—oh, you remember our Chairman, Ernest Dray, you met him at my little place. He’s determined to stamp this sort of thing out, once and for all. Hullo, it’s past three, I must be getting back to my grindstone. Many thanks for lunch. I don’t know why I’ve discoursed on this somewhat unsavoury topic. I’d have done better to consult you about the right of way.”

“You must another time. I did look up the subject once.”

“How about a spot of lunch with me this day week?” said Donaldson, remembering their business feud, and becoming uneasily jolly.

“This day week? Now can I? No, I can’t. I’ve promised this day week to go and see my little girls. Not that they’re little any longer. Time flies, doesn’t it? We’re none of us younger.”

“Sad but true,” said Donaldson, heaving himself out of the deep leather chair. Similar chairs, empty or filled with similar men, receded down the room, and far away a small fire smoked under a heavy mantelpiece. “But aren’t you going to drink your cognac? It’s excellent cognac.”

“I suddenly took against it—I do indulge in caprices.” Getting up, he felt faint, the blood rushed to his head and he thought he was going to fall. “Tell me,” he said, taking his enemy’s arm and conducting him to the door, “this

old man in the mackintosh—how was it the fellow you caught never put you on his track?”

“He tried to.”

“Oh, did he?”

“Yes, indeed, and he was all the more anxious to do so, because we made it clear that he would be let off if he helped us to make a major arrest. But all he could say was what we knew already—that it was someone from the hotel.”

“Oh, he said that, did he? From the hotel.”

“Said it again and again. Scarcely said anything else, indeed almost went into a sort of fit. There he stood with his head thrown back and his eyes shut, barking at us, ‘Th’otel. Keep to th’otel. I tell you he come from th’otel.’ We advised him not to get so excited, whereupon he became insolent, which did him no good with Ernest Dray, as you may well imagine, and called the Bench a row of interfering bastards. He was instantly removed from the court and as he went he shouted back at us—you’ll never credit this—that if he and the old grandfather didn’t mind it why should anyone else. We talked the case over carefully and came to the conclusion it must go to Assizes.”

“What was his name?”

“But we don’t know, I tell you, we never caught him.”

“I mean the name of the one you did catch, the village boy.”

“Arthur Snatchfold.”

They had reached the top of the club staircase. Conway saw the reflection of his face once more in a mirror, and it was the face of an old man. He pushed Trevor Donaldson off abruptly, and went back to sit down by his liqueur-glass. He was safe, safe, he could go forward with his career as planned. But waves of shame came over him. Oh for prayer!—but whom

had he to pray to, and what about? He saw that little things can turn into great ones, and he did not want greatness. He was not up to it. For a moment he considered giving himself up and standing his trial, however what possible good would that do? He would ruin himself and his daughters, he would delight his enemies, and he would not save his saviour. He recalled his clever manoeuvres for a little fun, and the good-humoured response, the mischievous face, the obliging body. It had all seemed so trivial. Taking a notebook from his pocket, he wrote down the name of his lover, yes, his lover who was going to prison to save him, in order that he might not forget it. Arthur Snatchfold. He had only heard the name once, and he would never hear it again.